

# Sports and Performance Psychology with Sari Shepphird

## Ologies Podcast

### January 15, 2018

Heeey, Ologites. It's Alie Ward being Alie Ward. Sports. Oh sports. Sports, sports. Here are some things I don't know. Here are some things I'm ignorant about. How cricket works. I don't know how football works. I don't know the rules for ping pong. I don't know which Williams sister is older. I don't know if technically they're fraternal twins. I don't know the difference between the Jets and the Mets. I'm pretty sure they're both current sports teams. I was just going look it up but you know what, I don't want to know. I like some mystery in my life.

I do have some intel, however, on stadium nachos served in a plastic helmet. They are delicious. I advise you to get them with sour cream if you're going do it. And also, I once threw out a first pitch at a Detroit Tigers game. Can you believe that?!?! I practiced for weeks and then I choked, and it bounced before, um, it hit the plate. And then afterwards no one would make eye contact with me. I just embarrassed everyone. That's okay.

So, sports aren't really my thing, but I do cry at Olympics commercials. Oh, I love those so much man. Whoo! And I'm all about the triumph of the spirit. Also, I really love self-help shit. I have this friend, Cristina Ochoa. She's a verified Mensa genius. She's also an actress on CW's *Valor*. She's in *Animal Kingdom*. She's just so awesome, and like most, just, total bad asses, she gives on-point pep talks and I needed one.

She recommended this book: *The Power of Full Engagement*. It's about managing your energy and not your time. It's kind of a Sports Psychology book and I was like, [*pathetically disappointed*] "Whaaat?" But it finally made sense that if scientists are studying ways for athletes to be at their best, I should be able to apply those strategies to doing things like getting my car washed and answering emails. That book got me interested in Sports Psychology and I wanted to do an episode of this in January while we're all just horny for change and personal growth. So over the holidays I tracked down a sports psychologist and I waited for her laryngitis to clear up and I recorded this just a few days ago.

This episode is fresh as hell! We talk about sports as kind of like a backdrop, but more so, this whole episode talks about performance in general, like performance anxiety, self-sabotage, getting in your own way, and identity formation and goals, and perfectionism. Which whether or not someone has showered you in gallons of Gatorade recently, that stuff matters to all of us. It's applicable to everyone. I loved this episode. I floated out of this ologist's office. I couldn't wait to put it up.

We're going get to that. First, I want to say a really quick thank you to all the new patrons on Patreon this week. Where'd you all come from!?! It was just like a bloom of new patrons. I can't thank you enough for making this podcast and this project possible. I have wanted to do something about ologies for ten years. I just started this up a few months ago and it makes me so happy.

Your donations help so much - from the equipment that I carry in a vintage Mervyn's handbag to meet up with these ologists, to the memory cards I have to buy, and the sound-editing software and mic cables. And it goes into the pockets of people like Steven Ray Morris, who's awesome at editing. He helps me so I can produce a whole hour a week. Thank you so much for making this a thing that

exists. Statistically less than 1% of listeners to podcasts or radio typically donate, so I see you and I thank you guys for making it possible.

Also, thank you to everyone who signal boosts. That's incredibly valuable too. That helps get *Ologies* heard by tweeting and gramming and subscribing and telling your office mate and your mother-in-law (if they're into the f-word and stuff) and rating and reviewing. All of that really matters and you guys have been spreading the word and it's amazing.

This is the part of the show I like to call "creeping your reviews" since I read each one of them and I look at your names and in my soul I say, "Thank you, name that I'm looking at." Here are a couple this week that just tickled me. I'm just gonna read them because they're so nice. Christina Treks says,

*I'm a scientist but normally I have a hard time listening to science podcasts for a variety of reasons, (she doesn't go into it) but Ologies is a perfect balance of info and humor that makes every episode interesting and fun. I listen to it on the bus, exercising, and even while doing science. And I've also got other people at work hooked on it, too. Thanks for the podcast.*

Thanks for telling people! Wow! I'm on a bus somewhere in someone's ears. That's creepy, and I like it! And then by contrast, kaywills3398 says,

*Non-science type person, loving the podcast. So I've always had a love/hate relationship with science. I love to learn. My brain hates to take in science related material. (I can see how that would be an issue.) Alie takes deep dives in this podcast while still talking to you like she's talking about what's on TV. Very conversational. A great look at different parts of science.*

Thanks! I also read the one by helanemcc. They say they could see us sitting next to each other on a SpaceX flight, both trying not to be terrified. I can see that, too. Pencil me in for that. Let's do that in like a decade. Okay, back to the episode.

The etymology of sports psychology. Psychology comes from the Greek *psykhē* for breath or spirit. That's kind of cool, but SPORT is amazing. I was like, "Am I even going to bother looking up the etymology of sport? Does anyone care?" Turns out, it's delicious. It's from the word 'desport', which means to enjoy oneself unrestrainedly. To frolic. Desport is also a noun that means 'diversion from serious work'. Essentially, it just means, like, kicking back. 'Disport' comes from the French *desportare* - to be carried away. So, 'sport' comes from being carried away with something. Meaning just frolicking. Uuhhh, I am dying from that poetry. Like, next time you think of *Sports Center*, just imagine it being called, "Carried Away into Care-Free Amusement Center." It's the same thing.

I tracked down a sports psychologist and I emailed her through her website. I was like, "Maybe, I'll never hear back. Who knows? It's the holidays." BOOM. A few hours later she emails me back. Swift as hell. And I lag. I don't respond out of laziness and because I was probably at the mall or something, and she leaves me a voicemail. Wow. Who does that? Amazing. The first thing I learned is people who get shit done, get shit done. If you just lollygag and flaccidly volley things back and forth over weeks, guess what? Podcasts don't get made. I love this woman already. I was already under her tutelage just by receiving a voicemail.

We met up in her lovely, Calabasas office and I take a seat on her couch, kind of as if I were a patient, which is why I probably confessed too many things during the course of this interview. I don't know; I was just in couch mode. Anyways, free therapy. Suckers! In this episode, please enjoy learning:

- To kill it under pressure.

- The value of relaxing.
- Why you freak out when it's the opposite what you should do.
- Why perfectionism is dumb.
- A professional ologist trick on how to kick ass.

Whether it's grappling in an MMA ring or giving a PowerPoint presentation in pleated slacks. We got you. Your life's about to get better. Gear the hell up for Sports and Performance Psychologist, Dr. Sari Shepphird.

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**Alie Ward:** How long have you been a sports psychologist?

**Dr. Sari Shepphird:** I've been working in Sports Psychology for about 10 years. I've been a therapist for more than 25 years, and so I've kind of navigated my way into this subfield and I really enjoy it.

**Alie:** How did you get to this subfield?

**Dr. Shepp:** It's kind of a long story, but I worked in eating disorders for most of my career. Treating eating disorders and working in Los Angeles, of course, I saw many athletes, performers, artists with eating disorders. It's just very commonplace here, so that was part of how I started working with athletes and performers. The other half of it is my own interest in sports and the performing arts, because I grew up in a sports family. I have two older brothers who were top athletes in numerous sports. We would talk strategy at the dinner table.

**Alie:** Really?

**Dr. Shepp:** Yes. We had tickets to different things that we would go to as a family and it was part of my culture. But I didn't get those genes, so I was never a competitor or athlete myself. I just enjoyed the sporting arena and the sporting world. And when I started to learn more about sports psychology and found out that I could go back and retrain and explore this new specialty, it was like a light bulb went off for me and I just ran to it.

**Alie:** Were you so excited to put in your application to go and study that? Was that an exciting process for you?

**Dr. Shepp:** It was very exciting because I felt as though I had found something that was a really great fit for me. I've always enjoyed being a psychologist and I've loved my work and find it fascinating and rewarding and enjoyable. This was something though, that felt like it fit *me*. And so yes, it's been a pleasure every step of the way.

**Alie:** Do you do free counseling for your brothers? [*Dr. Shepp laughs*] Or for your nieces and nephews?

**Dr. Shepp:** That's funny. [*DJ airhorn*] Well, I am on speed dial for some of my family members. [*both laugh*]

**Alie:** They're like, [*intensely*] "We got a t-ball game. How do we keep our eye on the ball?" [*Dr. Shepp laughs*] What is the difference between what you do in terms of sports physiology and sports psychology? Like, if someone comes to you and they're like, "I just can't make my knee work. Is it in my head? Is it in my knee?" What's the deal?

**Dr. Shepp:** It's a similar question to: What's the difference between you and a psychiatrist? I think a good sports psychologist will be trained in those areas and have a knowledge of biomechanics, of kinesiology, of exercise physiology. So that when you're speaking with a client, you have a sense of being able to rule out what might be going on in addition to the mental side of things. And you can also speak the athlete's language because athletes really like talking about the way their bodies work. They want to have optimal functioning, so it's helpful to be able to have that background.

If I'm working with... I'm thinking of someone that I've worked with in the past who is a sprinter, and in doing some of her training she would have to run with the cross-country runners a number of laps, just for the cardio aspect of her training. It was difficult for her to peter out much sooner than those athletes and it started to affect her mindset, so we had a discussion of Type I and Type II muscle fibers and how her body was made up differently than those athletes. It was actually a really productive discussion. So, it's helpful to have that background.

**Aside:** Now you never know when you may find yourself slipped through a portal into your dreams and wind up on *Jeopardy*. In case you do, here's the big difference between muscle fibers. You never know. You might need this. Type I, those are called slow-twitch fibers. They contract more slowly but they also tire less easily. Type II are fast-twitch fibers and they allow these quick powerful muscle contractions, like for sprinting.

Endurance athletes (surprise, surprise) tend to have more slow-twitch fibers while power athletes, like sprinters and throwers and jumpers, they tend to have more fast-twitch fibers. Now, these aren't in different parts of your body, like cutting apart a rump roast or like this part of the pork butt and that thing's over there. They're all integrated into the muscle fibers like different color threads in a rope, just in different proportions depending on how you train and what your genetics are.

Now I did 23andMe, the thing where you spit in a cup and find out what's wrong with your genes, and I found out I'm predisposed to having more fast-twitch fibers, which means at birth, I was an elite power athlete by genetics. It also means I can't be expected to last for long, and I probably would drop dead in a marathon. That's a theory I'm willing to let go untested, but these things are good to know for self-esteem purposes so you know genetically not to blame yourself.

**Alie:** So you can help provide some physical context, as well?

**Dr. Shepp:** Yes.

**Alie:** When you were studying in sports psychology did you go back and get a Master's, a PhD in it? And when you were studying, how much, like, football did you watch? [*Dr. Shepp laughs*] How much of it was like, "Can we just put on a game?" and like, "Check this out. See what he's doing?"

**Dr. Shepp:** Well, I'm kind of a sports geek so I watch sports pretty much every day whether it's some sort of sporting event or *Sports Center*, so that wasn't something new that I would have to do.

**Aside:** Dr. Shepp, as she is known, got her BA in Psychology and then she went and got an MA and a PhD in Clinical Psychology. If you want to add the specialty of Sports

and Performance Psychology, it's a matter of satisfying requirements. You have to go through the American Psychological Association, which is a series of additional classes. You're not just allowed to add "Sports" in front of Psychology without boning up and hitting some books. She can't just, like, change her business card.

**Dr. Shepp:** The way that I did things was a piecemeal compilation of different classes, so I didn't end up with another degree, I just ended up satisfying the requirements that were outlined by the American Psychological Association and their proficiency in Sports Psychology. They recommend that you have classes in certain areas, a certain amount of supervision or consultation within the field, and some other learning experiences that will prepare you. So even if you don't end up with another degree, and I did not, you end up satisfying those requirements by piecemealing these classes together.

**Alie:** What do you feel like is the biggest block? When someone comes to you, they obviously seek you out, or their coach seeks you out, and they're like, [*subtly*] "We got a problem here"? What do you find is the most common issue?

**Dr. Shepp:** People usually come to me with complaints about confidence, and that's the word they'll often use. But it turns out that it's not always about confidence. There's a lot of performance anxiety whether it's that there's pressure that's put on the athlete by themselves, by their families, by their teammates, by their coaches. They've had perhaps a bad experience in the past that they replay in their mind before a game or a match. Or they have some really lofty goals that they'd like to achieve, and those goals are in their mind all of the time so that any mistake that might happen begins to make them feel as though their goals are slipping away.

**Aside:** So sometimes from the outside, what looks like a confidence issue may really be an anxiety issue. Is that confusing? Of course, it is.

**Alie:** What is the difference between a lack of confidence and a surplus of anxiety? Are they not the same thing?

**Dr. Shepp:** Well, anxiety tends to be worry. It tends to be more about thinking about things that might happen, consequences. Confidence is sometimes just not thinking you're good enough, and not having a sense of self-efficacy. But usually, athletes who are performing at the top of their game know that they can do it. It's just that they worry that they won't be able to do it at the right time or in the right situation.

**Alie:** That's the problem with so many different careers. Do you see a lot of other clients who have similar anxiety and confidence problems in their jobs that are not sports related?

**Dr. Shepp:** Absolutely. Yes. I'm a sports psychologist and also a performance psychologist and so I work with other performance domains. And as you mentioned, so many careers involve some aspect of performance. I work with Fortune 500 executives. I work with performing artists, musicians, actors, actresses, creative artists. People who feel that an aspect of their work is to perform or to have some sort of a product, whether it's a product of their own initiation, or of a role they might be playing, or something they might be doing for a company.

And yes, I see the same kinds of anxieties in many different areas. Even those who haven't achieved a career status yet. Maybe they're students or they want to be public

speakers but they're still trying to hone those skills. They haven't actually arrived in a career yet. They have the same kinds of anxieties.

**Alie:** What do you do to chip away at those? Meditation? Different mindsets? What's the most effective way just to knock that out? Because that could really ruin your career, I imagine, right?

**Dr. Shepp:** Sure, yes, and often times people are their own worst enemy. They get in their own way. There's a number of things we can do. It's great because sports psychology is an evidence-based work and we have a lot of research as to what tends to help people the most.

**Aside:** I wanted to look into what kind of research articles are out there. And there are like 5 billion maybe?!? All of which I'll read right now. No, I won't. One interesting thing I did read about was in a paper called "A Comparison of Mental Strategies during Athletic Skills Performance." Essentially it said that to reduce maladaptive behaviors and reconstruct negative thoughts and increase one's concentration and focus, athletes use mental imagery and self-talk strategies. So, duh. It's like, "To get over bad habits and to stop yourself saying terrible things, you use self-talk, saying, 'Hey man, no, I'm gonna kill this.' "

I found another paper showing that athletes competing in individual sports were more prone to depressive symptoms than athletes competing in team sports because they bear more pressure and there's more attention on their individual performance. Which then made me think, and I was talking to a friend about this over dinner like, "Are you a solo sporter, or do you gravitate toward teams?" Because team playing sounds more fun.

For me, I would worry about just eating it so hard and choking and everyone being so mad at me in the locker room and texting each other and leaving me off a text thread, being like, [*judgmentally*] "Can you believe that flag football move?" Just thinking about it is making me nervous. Either way, what are the strategies to reduce anxiety?

**Dr. Shepp:** What I try to do is set goals with each person that I work with so that we're tailoring what we do to each person's unique situation. There are a number of mental skills, or psychological skills as we call them in sports psychology, that I might repeat client after client, but what I try to do is tailor them to each person's situation.

You mentioned mediation. That can be helpful for many people. It depends on a person's personality because sometimes meditation is... They just don't have the patience for it, and some people also don't think in that manner. They use different terminology and they prefer to quiet themselves in different ways, but that can be helpful for people. Diaphragmatic breathing is very helpful.

**Aside:** Diafermigbat - oh my goodness. Diagphergmatic? Diaphragmatic breathing is scientifically known as 'eupnea', which is kind of like apnea, but with an eu on the front. Eupnea, it's very relaxed. It's a natural form of breathing in all mammals. It involves [*soft, relaxed, meditative*] slow and deep inhalation through the nose, usually to the count of ten, followed by slow and complete exhalation for a similar count. You can repeat this process five or ten times. You can do it several times a day. Eupnea in

nature occurs in mammals whenever they're in a state of relaxation, when there's no danger nearby.

What is driving us to the chill zone? What is steering us to relaxville? It's a little friend called the parasympathetic nervous system and it's responsible for stimulating the rest and digest, also known as 'feed and breathe' activities. That's hanging out, especially after eating. Deep breathing helps counter the effects of the sympathetic nervous system. *That* is the thing that makes you feel like someone injected you with a syringe of panic juice.

**Dr. Shepp:** It works on the physiological symptoms and signals of anxiety like the rapid heartbeat, the shallow breathing, the muscle tension, but then it also helps us cognitively, because it slows down our thoughts. When we're oxygenated, we think more clearly. We have a greater sense of focus. So just a skill like deep breathing can be helpful. That sounds pretty simplistic to say that I help people by helping them to breathe deeply. [*laughing*]

Of course, that's not the only thing we do but it's one of the skills that can be useful because anxiety has not just a mental component but also a physiological component. When you're nervous you might get sweaty palms, your heart might beat faster, of course, you're breathing more shallow and it does affect the way that you think and feel, so that's part of it.

**Aside:** Let's get back to that sympathetic nervous system, aka fight or flight. The one that is chemically responsible for freaking you out. It's sympathetic, like "Hey man. You know what man? I know you got a bear right over there looking to disembowel you. I get that. Let me turn up the juice, get us outta here. Let's blast off motherfucker. We out!"

The sympathetic nervous system can accelerate your heart rate. It widens your bronchial passages so you get more air. It constricts your blood vessels. It can cause your pupils to dilate. It gives you goose bumps. It makes you sweat. It raises your blood pressure so you can [*feigned panic*] get outta there!

If you can't breathe and quiet this very helpful, sympathetic chemical cheerleader, you can always just join in on the ruckus. In one study, participants who told themselves, "I'm excited" before something anxiety provoking consistently outshone and felt more badass about their performances than those who lied and told themselves, [*anxiously*] "I'm calm. I'm so freaking calm. I'm fine." So if you can't beat it, join it. Just say, "I'm excited" before you're scared. Now, in general, routines also help.

**Dr. Shepp:** Then we use different routines for performers when they're preparing for say, an at bat. A 'pre-performance routine' we might call it for an actor or an actress. A 'pre-at bat routine' or a 'pre-shot routine' for different sports. And we integrate different things that will help an athlete or performer be able to hone their focus and be more in the moment. You hear that said often these days, "be in the moment" but it's such a difficult thing to do when you're performing. So we take a lot of different skills and combine them into a routine to help each person be able to maximize their sense of presence in the moment and put aside things that are more readily going to be entering their minds, like the worry, the anxiety, the sense of consequence.

**Alie:** Is there any science to sports superstitions like, “I gotta tap the dugout four times and then I gotta hit my bat with...,” or, “I have to have lemon drops before a dance performance”? Is there anything to superstitions that are actually calming anxiety?

**Dr. Shepp:** Not to superstitions per say, but to routines there is. And sometimes you have to use a fine scalpel to dissect which is which. *[both laugh]*

**Aside:** Okay, technically, what is a superstition? Well, the etymology of superstition is a great one. It comes from ‘superstare’, meaning standing above, and it references the fear of God standing above you messing with your shit. Standing above you being like, *[spooky and ominous]* “Don’t screw it up Jennnaaa. I’mmm watching youuu. Make sure to tap the toaster four times before you leave the house or you’re failing your exaaamm.” That’s a superstition.

Sports people make a lot of money so they have a lot of fear about losing the money so they have a lot of superstitions. That’s my theory and I’m not a scientist. Hockey players do crazy stuff. They grow play-off beards, which also makes sense for people who spend all of their time just hanging out on a slab of ice. Sometimes with their face on the ice. And related, Bruce Gardiner, a hockey player, would dip his hockey stick in a toilet pregame to show it who is boss.

In the NBA, this one guy, Carl Malone, was a power forward. He’s known for his almost 75% success rate in free throw shots and also for his incoherent mumbling. No one knows what he says. He goes up to the free throw line and mumbles to himself. Maybe it’s a prayer. Maybe he’s mouthing words to a Britney Spears song. Maybe it’s a witchy incantation. No one has any idea.

Serena Williams tends to wear the same pair of dirty socks over and over for luck. Now, you want another superstition of an elite hard bodied super star? Okay. Well, Marvin Meatloaf Aday, Meatloaf, the rock star from the 80s admits he has a huge collection of teddy bears and he has to travel with them. He has two favorites, Manny and Marietta. He takes them with him for good luck and he explains that they have feelings like you and me. That’s normal.

At NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory in the Mission Control Room, it’s lousy with peanuts. So, this is not just limited to athletes and rock stars. Rocket scientists – also superstitious. Cans of peanuts every which way at NASA Mission Control at JPL. Anaphylaxis be damned. Because after six failed launches of something called the Ranger Crafts, the mission manager handed out peanuts in the 1964 launch of Ranger 7. He figured, “You know what? Chewing or playing with them on the table would give my team something else to focus on.” That Ranger launch worked and the peanuts have been in the control room ever since then! Get yourself some peanuts, launch your stuff to another planet.

After I left Dr. Shepphird’s office I realized I really wished I’d asked about spirituality and performers’ confidence. I was like, “Ugh!”, so I emailed her because as we mentioned this woman is on top of things. She wrote me right back. She said,

*Spirituality seems to help with athletes with their big picture in terms of identity and sometimes with motivation, but I’m sure that spiritually-inclined athletes would say it makes all the difference, so I don’t want to overlook or minimize that. But in terms*



*of specific skills to help with relaxation and focus, these would generally still need to be learned.*

So prayer, peanuts, dirty socks, toilet baths, you've got to still learn how to breathe and stuff.

**Dr. Shepp:** If you look at someone like Rafael Nadal, for example, who has a whole host of superstitions that he goes through before each point, each serve, as he's sitting on the benches and waiting. There's not necessarily, from our perspective, a lot of rhyme or reason to what he does, but he's very religious about his very intricate routines. And some of those things might be called superstition.

But if you look at other athletes who have a routine that seems like there's a connection to their behavior. For example, you mentioned lemon drops before you might perform. There's something to that because you're helping your vocal chords so that aspect of a routine might be helpful. So with each athlete you want to make sure that there's a connection between their routine, or if it's a superstition and something they've been doing for a long time, that there's a connection between that and something that's actually going to help their performance.

I can give you some examples. You might see a batter or a golfer who loosens and then tightens again the Velcro on their glove before a golf shot or an at bat. That might actually be a trigger for them to focus on some sort of sensation in the moment, in that moment of time, and it helps them to get their perspective and their sense of time orientation in the moment. So it might not be a superstition that they have to open and close their glove four times. It might actually be a trigger or a cue for them to begin to narrow their focus to that particular moment in time.

To us as we're observing, it might seem like a superstition, but there are some routines that are actually not composed of superstition at all. They're composed of small elements put together to help an athlete focus on that moment in time.

**Alie:** What do you do if someone's pre-bat routine is like a pile of cocaine or something? [*Dr. Shepp laughs*] What do you do with it? You're just like, [*painfully concerned*] "That's not a good... That's not a good ritual."?

**Dr. Shepp** A lot of psychology is unlearning things that are not helpful and then learning things that are instead much more useful, much more productive. If someone comes and says they have an at-bat routine, they describe it for me and it's just a pile of superstition or maybe a pile of cocaine [*Alie laughs*] or unfortunately things that we've read about recently in the news like Daryl Strawberry.

**Aside:** What's up with Daryl Strawberry? I was like, "Oh, yes, totally, Daryl, yes, Daryl Strawberry in the news. Mmm." I had no idea what she was talking about so I just googled it and wow. Whoo! He, former New York Mets right fielder (this is baseball), apparently had just a raging sex addiction, and in the middle of games he says, "Yeah, I'd go between innings and stuff like that and run back and have a little party going on." In his words. Apparently, this guy would have people scope out women in the crowd that he would like to lay with and then he would do that in the middle of games. I once got fired when I worked at a ceramics shop because I defrosted the minifridge wrong. This guy, he's just like, "BRB."

**Dr. Shepp:** We'll talk about how that might not be productive [*awkward laugh*] for the next at bat. Instead we'll rework another routine and put something together that feels very comfortable and useful and productive to the athlete and that also has a connection for them to the task at hand.

**Alie:** What is it called when someone is awesome in the minor leagues, or they're awesome as a dilettante at something or as an amateur, and then they do so well they become a professional at it and then they start to suck because they're worried? Is there a name for that arc where you're like, "The stakes get so high, the more you get paid to do something, the less proficient you are at it."?

**Dr. Shepp:** Well that's performance anxiety. That's really what that would be. When someone transitions into a new level of sport or new genre in their performance or whatever it might be, they bring with them a set of expectations and a set of meanings that they assign to whatever is happening in their lives. And sometimes that's very unproductive. It's counterproductive and it begins to just form a whole host of expectations that really have nothing to do with their performance.

Or they have this sense of not being able to fail, not being able to make mistakes. Like there's this great fear that they have to fulfill all of their dreams and aspirations, so they're more focused on either the expectations of the past, the dreams and the things that have propelled them to that time and place, or about the fear of failure in the future. And those things are on their mind when they're trying to perform in the moment. So that's some of what we dissect to help an athlete be much more focused on things that help them to produce and to perform optimally.

**Alie:** Did you ever have any of these problems when you were getting your degree or when you were changing the focus of your career? Did you ever come upon performance anxiety or confidence issues?

**Dr. Shepp:** Confidence issues, I would say. Sure. I think that's ubiquitous. Everyone struggles here and there with a sense of confidence like, "Can I really do this?" Fortunately, one of my older brothers, who is one of the athletes in our family, helped me from a very young age to be able to perform when I was whatever it might be. Giving a speech is what I can remember. A situation where I had to give a speech in front of a lot of people and he taught me how to be in the moment. I thanked him for that a number of times in my life. He may not remember it, but I certainly do because it was really formative.

For me, I think I have that sense of being able to tune out things that are extraneous. To be able to be myself and know that that's good enough. And to not have to produce a sense of results based on what other people what might me want to do, but just to be satisfied with being in the moment, doing my best, and knowing that that's good enough. For athletes who are in high performance situations, good enough is not always good enough. Sometimes there's a sense of needing to bring home that hit, to have to score that point, to make that penalty kick, whatever that might be.

**Aside:** Recently there was a Cowboys' fan who lost a bet and after his wife's team, the Packers, won. I think this is football. He went outside and lit his jersey on fire and then while it was ablaze, he tried to put the jersey on his body. Alcohol was involved, as was Darwinism in general, but he survived. In LA, people light things on fire whether you win or lose, so there's no pressure there.

I thought maybe that was an Angelino tradition, like tank tops on Christmas or Botox during awards season, but no, sports riots is a thing everywhere. It has its own page on Wikipedia! Look at that! One of the first sports riots, this blew my mind, blew my mind, was way back in the year 532, which is like, not enough numbers. This was in Istanbul, once Constantinople, and get this, it was over chariot racing. Back then the teams were just named like blue and green, and a *riot* after a chariot race burned down half of the city. It killed at least 30,000 people. That is epic. The population of Earth wasn't that high back then. These were called the Nica Riots. Nica means 'win' or 'victory' or 'conquer', because the crowd was chanting "nica" repeatedly, like mobs.

So when you're watching the Olympics, please silently congratulate in your head each and every player you see on screen for not buckling under this kind of pressure and having like conspicuous diarrhea because that is some serious stress people. Can you even imagine? I get physically nauseous if I have to sing karaoke in front of 15 people who are deeply inebriated. No one would ever freak out if an opera singer missed a note. No one would burn anything down. But athletes, it's like, "Well, you made me do this. You made me. I had to set off a rocket into the stadium. You made me do this."

**Dr. Shepp:** There's much more of a great sense of pressure and things at stake than in what I do, but that's exactly what I've been trained to do is help people when there is something at stake, to be able to focus on what makes them the most productive. And again, to be able to weed out what's extraneous and gets in the way.

**Alie:** When your brother told you to "be in the moment", was that his main advice? Just like, "Be in the moment. You're up there, just enjoy it."?

**Dr. Shepp:** Be myself was his main advice, and to practice, which is a lot of what I talk about with my athletes and performers. When you know that you're prepared then you can rely on that preparation, and that's really important for those who have a performance aspect to their career. If you know that you're going to an audition or you know that you're meeting with a team for the first time or you have a try out for a team and you haven't been preparing, of course you're going to be much more nervous when that situation arises.

If you can rely on your preparation and then *trust* that preparation, then that's something that can help you through that sense of anxiety. So there's a big bridge often times between the preparation and the trust of the preparation, but navigating that bridge is a lot of what sports psychology is all about. So that you have a sense of those footprints along the bridge being enough to take you to a place of calm and a sense of centeredness and preparedness versus feeling like you're looking at the end game before you've even started the first quarter.

**Alie:** Which I think so many people do. Do you see a lot of actors struggle with auditions and the audition process? As someone who has worked in TV before, it's brutal. It's just rejection, rejection, like 99% of the time.

**Dr. Shepp:** Yes.

**Alie:** Do you see burnouts with actors?

**Dr. Shepp:** Absolutely, and I work with people who transition from one career to the other. Whether it's an athlete who wants to be a performer or a performer who wants to

leave the performance world altogether because there is a pervasive having to deal with rejection. There is. That's just part of the career. There's that pervasive nature of rejection and some people are more prepared for that than others. And some people take it I guess more personally than others.

Depending on how much a person's identity is tied into what they do, they're going to respond to rejection differently. So if you have a strong sense of self and you know you are more than what you produce, it will help you to face the rejection. Much more so than someone who has no sense of themselves outside of what they do and so every performance and every inning and every game is a reflection to them of who they are and it makes it much more difficult.

**Alie:** What is that called? I have that. What is that called? [*both laugh*] I definitely am like, "I'm as good as my last thing I did." Like, what is that called when you're...? Is it just like an extrinsic value of yourself?

**Dr. Shepp:** Yes, well, there's identity conflicts in that kind of scenario. We would call it 'identity foreclosure' where there's a sense of being really wrapped up in what you do and equating that with who you are.

**Aside:** Identity foreclosure sounds terrifying. It can also relate to adolescents who just aren't sure who they are yet, so they just adopt the identity they think others want them to have. Which when you look at it in those terms, really sucks. Let's not do that. Nobody. Nobody do that. In my scientific opinion, just be you. Deal? Okay? All of us? Me too? Cool. By the way, this is a concept, this whole identity foreclosure thing, that was first explored by a psychologist named Erik Erikson. Erik Erikson, which I can understand why, perhaps, he had some identity issues growing up.

**Dr. Shepp:** I think everyone wants to do their best when they have a career that they really care about. They want to perform at their best, and of course we're disappointed when we feel like we didn't perform our best or as well as we would have liked to. To be able to separate that out from your sense of value as a person, your sense of worth and knowing that you are able to contribute to your own world, to society, to your relationships in a broader manner than just what you offer in your performance is what's helpful.

**Alie:** How do you deal with a life/work balance with what you do?

**Dr. Shepp:** That's a struggle. Yes, it is. And I think I've yet to meet anyone who's never struggled with that. [*laughs*]

**Alie:** Especially in LA.

**Dr. Shepp:** Yes, especially in LA.

**Alie:** LA, it's like, "If you don't have ten hustles, go back to Kansas."

**Dr. Shepp:** It's difficult, I think, because of the world in which we live, and especially in a city like Los Angeles and in most sports towns because sports towns tend to be busy places for the most part. What I've tended to learn is that you can probably do everything you want to do, you just can't do it all at the same time. That helps me to be able to put things on the back burner and know that I'm not really missing out on an opportunity.

It's just not the right time for the opportunity, and it feels then, that there's less at stake.

Because if I am facing an opportunity and I feel like there's just something at stake here like, "I'm afraid to let this opportunity go because it might never come my way," then I'm also tying to that, a greater sense of anxiety and of having to perform and really make it worthwhile. It just adds so much stress to the situation. But if I can let myself know with some degree of assuredness that that opportunity will probably present itself again: "It did once before, and so it will probably will again. I just don't have the time for it now, and that's okay. There's a lot of other things in my life that I can do that are fulfilling." That helps me to keep a sense of balance.

I don't always have a perfect sense of balance, and again, I don't know anyone that does. I think it's more that you can have a feeling of balance more often than not and knowing that you're riding more on trusting that opportunities will come back.

**Aside:** Now there are plenty of books on this. There's one called *The Power of a Positive No*. Also in the top sellers in self help is Shonda Rhimes' *The Year of Yes*, which is all about saying yes to everything. So, I don't know. I don't know what to tell you guys. I suppose it's all about balance or something. I don't know. [big sigh]

**Alie:** Do you have to do that with your clients? Do you have to remind them, like, "Okay, it's great that you trained, but you need a rest day," or maybe, "You've had too many rest days and you need to go train."? Do you have to help them find that balance?

**Dr. Shepp:** This is a typically psychologist answer, and the answer is: it depends.

**Alie:** Okay. [both laugh]

**Dr. Shepp:** It depends on the athlete and what they are actually looking to do. If I'm talking with an Olympian, I can't convince them that the opportunity might present itself again because realistically, it really might not. So we have to shape their preparation and their thinking with that in mind, and yet at the same time to have balance in their thinking so that they're not functioning every day with a sense of anxiety and panic over this being their only opportunity. Of course, that is the last thing they would want to have, or that I would want for them to have.

But if I'm talking with someone who is making a decision between which coach to study with or which ballet company to dance with or which team to play for even or which coach to try to work with and see if they can get a try out for, then we look at options. Because oftentimes there is more than one option, and we want to keep that in mind.

So it's not as though I'm asking people to put aside their dreams or to feel as though they can never do what it is that they want to do. I would never want to convey that, nor is that really the reality. But we want to make sure that people are not having a sense of tunnel vision when they think about their choices and their career and that they're taking the broader scheme into account.

I hope that makes sense because I don't want to imply that I'm talking people out of what they want to do or asking them to not think about their goals and dreams. That's not at all what I'm doing. I'm just wanting to make sure that their thinking is fluid and

that it's not so rigid that they start to have a lot of counterproductive thoughts and behaviors.

**Alie:** Right. That they have more choice.

**Aside:** Okay, just a production side note. I thought that my phone was off, per protocol, but it very unprofessionally started ringing and buzzing and buzzing and buzzing which was mortifying. I don't know what I was thinking but without breaking eye contact with Dr. Shepphird, I just shoved the phone under the couch cushion without acknowledging that it was ringing which just made it so much more awkward and mortifying. Oops!

**Alie:** That actually brings me to a question. How do you get your performers and hyper-focused athletes and dancers and all this to not distract themselves with things like phones and social media? Have you noticed in your practice, because you've been doing this for 10 years, have you noticed, like "Oh no. Twitter is becoming a problem." Or like, "Instagram is becoming a problem with people who need to focus."?

**Dr. Shepp:** Actually, I would say it is a frequent conversation that we have. Social Media is a frequent conversation. I think for a number of reasons. One is because if you're talking about someone... Let me say that there's a myriad of reasons why it might be an issue. One example would be if someone has difficulty focusing and spending their time in preparation and practice.

Practice is not sexy; it is not exciting. It's pretty routine and often boring for athletes who are really at the top of their game. They don't feel like they want to practice. Sometimes they tell themselves they don't need to practice, so they do things with their time that's not the most productive, whether it's social media or gaming or whatever the case may be. So, we might have to talk about cutting down on that. It makes me sound lame, I think, sometimes. *[laughs]*

**Alie:** No! Are you kidding?! I feel like it's... I mean, there's a setting on your phone you can go to where you can see how many hours in the last 24 hours.

**Dr. Shepp:** I didn't even know that.

**Alie:** You can go to the battery setting. You go to the battery and it shows you which apps you spent the most time on. There's a little clock. You click on it and it tells you how many hours in the last 24 hours or the last seven days you've spent on Twitter or Instagram or Facebook or...

**Dr. Shepp:** Good to know.

**Alie:** It's horrifying.

**Dr. Shepp:** Frightening, right? *[laughs]*

**Alie:** Yes. You're like, "Oh. I have a second job. It's just scrolling for no money." You can do that on your phone. I did that recently and was like, "Oh, that's why I'm always tired."

**Aside:** To recap: If you have an iPhone, go to settings, go to general, go to battery, and then click on the little clock icon on the right and it will tell you how much of your life you been wasting scrolling. Feel free to screenshot this and tweet it at me @ologies. I will show you mine for accountability. This will also make both of our minutes on

Twitter and Instagram go up but I feel like this is a good lesson. I'm going to look at mine right now. *[gasps]* Oh my god. In the last 24 hours, I have spent 3.1 hours on text messages. In the last 24 hours! I spent 1.2 hours on Twitter, 1.2 hours on Instagram. *[clock ticking]* I'm sorry for that long pause. I was just processing that. It's not good.

**Alie:** Do you find distractibility is something that is only a problem on their off time, or is that a problem when they're performing or when they're practicing too? Like, just distracted mind.

**Dr. Shepp:** It's not always a distracted mind. It can be, especially if someone has ADD or some sort of condition where they actually have a mind that is wired differently and it makes them more likely to have focus issues and be distractible more than say the average person. But sometimes it can be because a person is not motivated. Sometimes it's passive aggressive behavior to their coach. *[both laugh]*

**Alie:** Like, "Watch this. I suck."

**Dr. Shepp:** Or to their teammates. And we find bullying that happens on teams and between athletes and performers. Conversations that take place on social media that wouldn't take place face to face. Wars that happen amongst teammates on social media.

These things are real and they affect people's lives, so it can be an issue for sure. And then there's other issues that happen with regards to social media. For example, when someone is reaching maybe a new level of recognition or of fame or of success and then they have to engage social media even if they don't want to. Or maybe they have been engaging social media but they need to think about shifting how they have done that, so they start to communicate in ways that help their brand, so to speak, or help their image or even just help their sense of character and integrity. There's different issues that come up.

**Alie:** I wonder if that's hard to go from being kind of authentic on social media to having a spotlight on you and then you have to scrub your voice a little bit. I wonder if there's a weird disconnect in your own identity there.

**Dr. Shepp:** It's a huge challenge. I try to help people find an avenue where they feel like they can still be themselves because I actually don't feel it's the most productive to counsel someone to put on a false image or to have sort of a pseudo-self in public and then feel like they're someone completely different in private. I think that becomes very tedious and difficult to navigate and, I think at some point, it's going to be hard almost to separate the two and can *cause* anxiety.

I try to help people feel as though they can still be themselves, but just to think a little bit about how they want to express themselves in such a way that they're doing so with integrity to their sense of self, but in such a way that it's creating a receptive atmosphere to the people that they're speaking with.

**Alie:** That is such a good point. I go through that on whether or not I should swear on this podcast a lot. *[Dr. Shepp laughs]* Do you think that there's any value to the old trick of picturing people in their underpants? That's just like so distracting.

**Dr. Shepp:** *[laughing]* I've talked about that with people before and sometimes it's really well received and sometimes I'm looked at like I'm crazy. It's not usually that I say, "Think about everyone in their underwear," but something to that effect, like to remember

that everyone is a human being and that no one is perfect. Because I think if you ascribe perfection to someone else, you're much more likely to feel like you have to achieve that yourself, and there is no such thing as perfection.

In the performance world, regardless of which sport or which performance domain, perfectionism itself is a huge problem that is very counterproductive and that actually keeps people from being able to perform at their best. So that idea of seeing other people as perfect is just as much of an interference as thinking of yourself as needing to be perfect.

**Alie:** Why do some people develop perfectionism and other people are like, "Eh, my best is my best."?

**Dr. Shepp:** I think perfectionism has an underlying sense of anxiety when you boil it all down because it's really a fear of making a mistake. Sometimes of course, people just want to succeed and so they feel as though they have to be perfect in order to succeed, and it's just having a discussion about the realistic or unrealistic nature of that kind of an idea and it's easy for people to strip off that perfectionism. But when there's a true sense of perfectionism, it's usually fueled by an underlying sense of anxiety and as though if you're less than perfect, you somehow are then a failure and that's just not tolerable.

**Alie:** That's so fascinating.

**Aside:** Side note to myself. To Alie: please reread that copy of Brené Brown's *The Gifts of Imperfection*, that I read once and it was great, but I forgot a bunch of it. Also, go jogging and listen to more rap. You love that. You don't have to be good at it. But you love it.

**Alie:** Do you ever prescribe for any of your clients an anthem to listen to? Like *One Moment in Time* by Whitney Houston? The theme of the Olympics? Perhaps Eminem's...? I forget his big anthem. The one about him throwing up mom's spaghetti. I'll remember and I'll put this as an aside.

**Aside:** [clip from Eminem song *Lose Yourself*: "Yo. His palms are sweaty, knees weak, arms are heavy. There's vomit on his sweater already, mom's spaghetti. He's nervous, but on the surface he looks calm and ready. To drop bombs."] DAH! It's *Lose Yourself*. I don't know what happened. My brain's hard drive just could not deliver that information at that time. I'm not going to lie to you. I have thought about this song on the way to, like, important meetings like, "Yeah." It also completely ruined spaghetti for me. I think for a lot of us, let's be honest. Eminem, some sick anthems. Also, probably a terrible person? Harrumph.

**Alie:** Do you have a song that you're like, "Man, just blast this!"?

**Dr. Shepp:** I ask almost everyone that I work with what kind of music that they listen to. And then at some point we'll have a discussion about the different mood that a song or musical genre might put them in, and ask them to let me know which song or which kind of music puts them in the best performance mode because sometimes people don't use music as they could. It can be very beneficial.

For some, it's not so because they become too distracted by it so they just can't focus on what they need to do or it doesn't really enhance their performance as much as it takes away if they're thinking about the piece or the music. But for others it's very helpful,



really useful to be able to have a song that they play in their mind for different reasons. Sometimes it's a distraction because if you can have a song going through your mind, then you're not thinking about other things that might make you anxious. If you're say, at the starting line of a race, instead of thinking about your competition that is to the right or the left of you, how fast they might run, or imagining yourself tripping.

**Aside:** I just want you to know I used to run hurdles in high school. Once I was running one. I was in the lead. There were only three of us in the race. I tripped over one and I fell right onto my face area and then I got up. I kept running and I stumbled over the next one also. I looked up and there was this Adonis of a boy in the opposing school's team and he was actively laughing at me and I'm so glad YouTube wasn't invented. But here we are. I lived to tell the tale. It was more traumatic than the time I got hit by a car. I'll go into that on another episode.

**Dr. Shepp:** Or having a bad pass of the baton or whatever it might be. If you focus on the song that's in your head and you become sort of enthralled in it or mesmerized by it or whatever the case may be, then you're distracted from that anxiety and it can be helpful. Other times music is used to boost confidence like you mentioned, an anthem.

It might be everything from Chance the Rapper to something that's more classical in nature depending on what it is that you're trying to do. Like a biathlete, for example, in the Olympics who needs to slow down their heartrate and be able to have that great control, they probably don't want to have a booming, fast anthem in their mind. But for others, if they want to come out with a sense of confidence, and perhaps in their sport a sense of intimidation to their competition, then sometimes it's really useful to just pump themselves up with a song.

**Aside:** As long as we're tweeting out our battery screenshots, let me know what your anthems are. Your good ones. I need like a *Rocky*-level, take-no-prisoners playlist for 2018. I will Spotify this list and I will post the link on Patreon. I don't know how to make Spotify playlists, but I will listen to these anthems as I figure it out.

**Alie:** Do you ever watch sports and you can see why an athlete choked on a move?

**Dr. Shepp:** Sometimes I have a sense, sure. I can't read anyone's mind, so of course I can't know exactly what they're thinking. But sometimes if you watch their body language you can just tell that their mind isn't on what they're doing. Whether it's because they're looking around more than they potentially could be or usually are, or you can just see that their breathing is more shallow because if you look closely you can see the rise or the fall of their chest, or just some of the facial expressions they have, or because they're losing their temper more than they should or more than they typically do, then you can get a sense of that.

**Alie:** Do you have a favorite movie that involves sports psychology, like *Bolt* or *Rudy*? I don't know sports movies. *[both laugh]*

**Dr. Shep:** There are some really great sports movies I have to say and some great speeches in sports movies, like *Remember the Titans* and *Miracle*. Those are great sports movies and *The Rookie* is another really good one. *Field of Dreams*. I could probably go on and on about sports movies.

**Alie:** That's a lot of sports movies!

**Dr. Shepp:** There's a lot of great sports movies, but actually one of the movies that I think has the best psychology behind it in terms of performance is *The King's Speech*. I loved that movie and I think that it's a great example of how you can use something that doesn't seem to have a connection to someone's performance and yet it unleashes someone's best performance.

**Aside:** This was a 2010 film with Colin Firth who plays King George VI and Geoffrey Rush who's a speech therapist and yes, I cried watching the trailer as I am wont to do.

*[clip from The King's Speech]*

*King George VI: Listen to me! Listen to me!*

*Speech Therapist: Why should waste my time listening to you?*

*King George VI: Because I have a voice!*

*Speech Therapist: Yes, you do.*

As a King he has to do things like dress up fancy and publicly declare a war on Germany in 1939 which was, like, a slightly bigger deal than posting a story to Snapchat without filters, but whatever. People get stressed about different things. Also, Helena Bonham Carter wears hats and looks like a faded, milky painting in this and I love her.

**Dr. Shepp:** He has to overcome stuttering. As the king of England he needs to present himself as calm and confident, and of course someone with a terrible stuttering problem in the midst of war isn't going to instill confidence. The person who comes to train him to overcome that stutter issue helps him in a number of ways. One is through the use of music. As you watch the movie, you'll see while he is reading some type and giving a speech and he has music on that he's listening to through headphones, he doesn't stutter. It was an indication that it wasn't something physiological as much as it was psychological, and that was interesting and relates a lot to what I do. I also loved the fact that the cure for his stuttering was to have f-bombs going through his mind at key moments when he was inclined to stutter.

**Aside:** This kind of therapy seems fun. Okay, cover your kids ears or have a heart to heart with them afterward and explain to them what all of these words mean.

*[clip from The King's Speech]*

*King George VI: Bugger, bugger, buggerty, buggerty, buggerty, fuck, fuck, arse!*

*Speech Therapist: Yes!*

*King George VI: Balls! Willy and tits.*

**Dr. Shepp:** I thought that was really innovative and really useful and a lot of what I talk about with a lot of my athletes. Because if you can relax yourself, maybe by making yourself laugh, by blowing off some steam, letting go of some anger, helping yourself to feel more comfortable, then you're more likely to be more loose.

In sport, you want to be loose. You want your muscles to be loose so that you can have the greatest range of motion. If you're a performer, you want to be loose so that your vocal chords and even your cognitions and your thinking, it's all loose and you have a

greater sense of freedom of choice. So I thought it was a fantastic intervention and I think it's useful for sport as well.

**Alie:** Oh, I gotta go watch that. [*Dr. Shepp laughs*] I have questions from listeners.

**Dr. Shepp:** Great!

**Alie:** Are you ready? I call this a rapid-fire round, but it's never usually rapid [*both laugh*] because they're really good questions. Michael Gonzalez, great question, asked: How vital is a good night's rest for an athlete's physical and mental performance and what is the optimum amount of sleep a human should get?

**Dr. Shepp:** That's a great question.

**Alie:** Right?!

**Dr. Shepp:** It is a great question, and sleep is often overlooked in terms of its value for performance. It's very important. The number of hours that an athlete will need is going to vary athlete to athlete, and it's also going to vary sport to sport. But it's very important because you want to make sure that you're giving your muscles and your organ systems and everything that's involved in the physical aspect of sport, the rest and recovery that is necessary.

Your brain is that central command that helps your muscles and your bones and your structures do exactly what they need to do when you're performing. So your central command zone, the brain, needs to have the rest that's important for it to be able to function optimally as well. And of course, who hasn't had a day... It's usually not after just one night, I should say, but who hasn't had a time period in their life where they haven't slept in days and you just don't have the thinking capability as when you're more rested. A lot of sport is making tactical decisions and strategic decisions and you want to have that clear mindedness in order to be able to do it.

Now, I don't want to scare any athletes off in thinking as though that if they don't get a good night's sleep they won't perform well because that's not true. We have a great sense of equilibrium in our systems and if we miss a night or two of sleep, we can still function optimally and at our best. But as a practical routine you want to make sure that you're getting the rest that you need. Your body will let you know what the number of hours is for you in particular, and you want to make sure that you're doing that so you can function at your best.

**Alie:** Do you have a sleep routine? Like do you go to bed at ten and wake up at six, or is it all over the place?

**Dr. Shepp:** Being a psychologist it's hard to not pay attention to sleep hygiene. It's some of what I think is important regardless of what I'm working with. Sleep is important for recovery from depression. It's important when you're talking about anxiety. It's important for performers. It's important for business people. It's important for athletes. A lot of what I do is talk about sleep hygiene, so yes, I do have pretty good sleep hygiene. I don't go to bed at exactly the same time every night, but I am pretty good about staying within a zone of time.

**Alie:** Really? What is it?

**Dr. Shepp:** [*boisterous laugh*]

**Alie:** Tell me everything.

**Dr. Shepp:** Before I had kids, it was between 12 and one. Now, it's much earlier.

**Alie:** So have kids. That always helps you get way more sleep. Having a baby. Just kidding. Craig Minami wants to know: What is the ideal time of day to compete? Is there one?

**Dr. Shepp:** There is not necessarily an optimal time to compete because everyone's rhythms are going to be different. So somebody who is a morning person and feels like they have the most clear head in the morning might feel like they function most optimally in the morning. And then of course, that might be different for someone who is a night owl. But you'll get into a routine and a rhythm in order to make sure that you're functioning at your best. So somebody who wakes up at ten or 11 every morning and then needs to go to 6am auditions is going to have to adjust their schedule so they feel like they're the most alert and the most awake.

**Aside:** All right. A 6am audition sounds frankly illegal, but I get what she's saying.

**Dr. Shepp:** Again, our bodies, as I mentioned, are really adaptable and have a great sense of equilibrium, so if we need to perform at a time that's different than when we feel like we're the most awake and alert, we will adjust pretty well to that.

**Alie:** That's good to know. Priscilla Reimann wants to know: A few years ago Anna Kournikova got the yips while serving her tennis matches. As a sports psychologist what sort of things would be used to get her past this? And what is the 'yips'?

**Dr. Shepp:** The yips is something that the technical term would be 'vocal dystonia' and it's common in many sports.

**Aside:** What are yips?! So, at first, I thought she was talking about those yappy grunts made by a lot of tennis players. [*clip from a tennis match with the noise of tennis balls hitting the ground and rackets accompanied by vocal grunts from the players*] But no. 'Yips', which have no known etymology. No one can trace the origin of this term. They are these involuntary wrist spasms. They're like jitters and twitches and little wrist goblins, and they mess up your tennis and baseball and cricket player people.

Now, it happens most in sports which involve a single, precise, well-timed action like golf or darts. Which is like, "Is darts a sport? Does a drunken bar hobby count as a sport?" I looked up who's a big darts person, and evidently there are a lot of them. There's this one 57-year-old guy named Phil Taylor in England who is like the Dude of Darts. He used to make ceramic toilet paper holders, but since he became a darts champion, the guy has earned like \$10 million. When a dart player gets the yips, according to science, it's called 'dartitis'. That has its own Wikipedia page. I don't mean to be a dick, but I think technically, that means the dart would be inflamed if it's dartitis, but dart people live your lives. Dr. Shepp explains:

**Dr. Shepp:** We talk a lot about the yips in golf, and then we see it a lot in baseball. Tennis is another sport where we see the yips. And in a number of different sports where repetitive motion takes place, and especially we've found through research that when there's motion that involves the palms facing each other, it tends to be more frequent than in other sports, which is really interesting.

There's a few different things that we've found to be useful for overcoming the yips. Part of it is an intervention where you address any physiological aspects of the yips. We've had golfers like Bernhard Langer and Johnny Miller and many over the years who've had the yips in putting, where they have to quiet their bodies and become very still and very calm, and then they would experience this little jerky motion that felt like it was coming out of the blue. And then you could imagine how much anxiety would develop around that, and then especially when you're putting, it's a huge issue.

We've had people who've had the yips. Catchers and first basemen and pitchers who feel like there's a little uncontrollable motion or jerk that happens just before they need to release the ball. So it comes into play there. And then in tennis with Anna Kournikova, the same kind of issue.

You want to address the physiological aspect of it. Sometimes it's just about changing your grip, changing your swing or your stance, and that can be a release and help to give the player a sense of having greater control, but also a different way of approaching their motion so that it relaxes everything. So there's that component to it. But then there's the very important mental part of it. Because if you are afraid that you're going to have the yips appear in a performance, obviously you can almost have a self-fulfilling prophecy that takes place. Or you just have greater anxiety. That in and of itself can lead to jerky motions.

You want to have a routine that helps an athlete be able to feel much more calm. Deep breathing is a part of that. Trigger words and cue words. Muscle relaxation. The yips is a really common problem, so we treat that a lot in sports psychology. If they can focus in on aspects of that that they control and that they have a sense of control, then that can take them from focusing on the yips and put their attention and energy on something more productive.

**Alie:** Radha wants to know: How do athletes overcome intense pain during competition? Like Kerri Strug, the Gymnast in the 92 Olympics landing on her vault on a leg with a sprain and tendon damage. Is it adrenaline? Can one really push that kind of pain to the back of their mind? They say that every time they're in that much pain they just get dizzy.

**Dr. Shepp:** Well Kerri Strug of course is an amazing example. If I could make her almost a poster child for what athletes have overcome in sport, it's pretty amazing. I am in awe every time I watch the replay of that.

**Aside:** If you get a chance, google "Kerri Strug 1996 ankle." You'll find it. This tiny human with ripped back muscles and this fluffy pixy cut charged at a vault. She tosses her body in the air and lands on essentially one foot because the other one is torn to shreds. Even as an adult, her voice is super, super high like a cartoon ferret and later she said, [*in high pitched voice*] "Yes, I think my ankle hurt, but I think the will took over the pain." So her team got the gold and her coach carried her to the podium to accept the medal. Carried away by sports. As I write this by the way, it is Saturday afternoon. I have not yet washed my face today because it is too much effort. So, applause.

**Dr. Shepp:** It's difficult for athletes to manage pain and to have an approach to pain that is balanced and helps them to prepare themselves to perform optimally. Because pain

itself, as you can imagine, is such a huge distraction. And so, what athletes do with regard with managing their pain is going to come down to decisions about whether it's better for them to push through the pain, or better for them to not try. Because, if I said that every athlete should do as Kerri did and risk further injury because of what's expected of them, I would not be telling the truth.

Athletes have had careers that have been ruined and been forced into early retirement because they haven't paid attention to their pain and taken time off to recover when they should have. And at the same time, we've seen stories like Kerri's where we're just in awe of how someone can manage that. So to answer her question more specifically, adrenaline is amazing. It's amazing what it can lead you to do and it can give you a sense of focus and of energy and of almost an anesthesia that can help an athlete perform through pain.

**Aside:** How does adrenaline work? Well, number one, I didn't know that adrenaline is also epinephrine. I thought those were two completely different chemicals in your body. They're the same thing. Good to know. Dr. Sanjay Gupta himself says, "A stress hormone called noradrenaline will flood the brain, blocking its ability to produce pain." So that's how that works. Generally. Very generally.

**Dr. Shepp:** And because sometimes what's at stake in the moment just seems more important than the pain. So when I talk about pain, yes, it's amazing what adrenaline can do. And what a great routine would do in terms of mindset. What you focus on that helps to distract you from the pain and to focus on the things that you can control in a situation. Again, that element of control is so important. And that's a lot of what we talk about is increasing that sense of an athlete's control so you focus on those things instead of the pain. And yet, there's that caveat, you want to listen to the pain, too.

**Alie:** And you mentioned you have children. Did the process of having children give you any kind of...? Did the actual birth give you any new insight on pain and performance and stuff?

**Dr. Shepp:** On pain? *[laughing]* Yep. Yes. Pain. Pain, yeah. That is definitely the way you'd want to describe it is painful. *[both laughing]*

**Alie:** Can you imagine being on an Olympic gymnast team while going through childbirth? You're like, "Just push through it." The worst.

**Dr. Shepp:** But that's what you do, you push through it. You push through it because there is an end goal that is more important than the pain. So that analogy is a good one because you do just learn to deal with the pain, to ignore the pain, to push through the pain in order to get to the end goal because the pain becomes less important than what you're doing. And that's probably what somebody like Kerri would have had on her mind, and that's what a lot of athletes will do is they'll focus on that end goal. Again, you just want to make sure that you're smart about listening to the pain because sometimes pushing through it is not the right decision to make.

**Alie:** Ooogh. Ouch. Oooh. Dustin had the question: What are your thoughts on marijuana as a performance-enhancing drug? I heard some people use it as a pre-workout and/or a pre-competition stimulant. Asking for a friend. With a winky face.

**Dr. Shepp:** *[laughing]* Let me say the good and the bad about marijuana. I think it's amazing that we have cannabis for people who wouldn't otherwise find a drug to be able to equip them for life. And I think that as far as pain is concerned, it's been really useful for a number of people and someone in my life who is alive because of marijuana when no other substance was available for this person to come through the illness and the struggle that they were experiencing. So I'm grateful for the things it can do.

On the other hand, there is some misunderstanding about how it can help and enhance performance. A lot of discussion these days about CBD and the component of cannabis that might be useful and yet not have some of the side effects like THC, and yet there's a lot that we're discovering that we really don't know about marijuana. And some of the aspects of relaxation and the things that combat and reduce anxiety are actually much more related to the THC than the CBD, so we're not really quite sure yet how much CBD alone, without the THC, is useful for managing the performance anxiety or anxiety in general. We're still trying to discover that. So I'll just say that the research is still outstanding on some of that.

And then the last part of my answer is that I meet more and more athletes who rely on marijuana to manage performance anxiety. I know a number of performers and athletes who have performed or been in a game or a match high and they do really well. But the drawback to that is that you rely on it, and so then if you don't have marijuana for whatever reason, whether you're on the road or it's just not available to you or you're trying to stop or whatever the reason is, and you haven't instead developed a core base of skill to be able to manage anxiety otherwise, you're going to find yourself wishing that you had.

**Alie:** Right. Last two questions. What is your least favorite thing about what you do? What is the hardest thing about what you do?

**Dr. Shepp:** The heartbreaking stories are the hardest. Especially when I'm talking with youth athletes where you have a situation that the athlete or the performer really does find themselves surrounded by people who communicate to them that they are their performance, and that there is a lot at stake in their mind, some really serious things at stake, about their participation in their sport or their performance world. Someone who doesn't allow themselves to eat; that's a really difficult one to witness because they're punishing themselves, or they feel like perfection somehow equates with a number on a scale.

It's difficult, and I've worked with that for years, but it becomes no less heartbreaking. And in other stories where, whether it's parents or coaches, and often well-meaning parents. There's no reason to vilify parents who love their kids and want them to perform their best, but sometimes people in an athlete's or a performer's life, they just have misguided ideas about what might constitute happiness and success for their child or their loved one. And it's difficult sometimes to break that pattern of belief. It's not impossible and I witness change like that every day, but you asked what's most difficult and I think that that's the most difficult.

**Alie:** What is your favorite thing about the job? Most fun? Most rewarding? Something that just gets you really excited to start your week?

**Dr. Shepp:** I have to say I love my job and I think there's a lot of things about it that I love. I don't even know if I would identify just one thing because I love coming to work. I love waking up knowing what I do and what I get to do every day. I love it and I'm passionate about it and I'm motivated day after day after day.

But yes, of course, when I see people have a light bulb that goes off, that figurative light bulb and you can see them making a connection, something that will allow them to feel more free in their life, to have a greater sense of fulfillment and enjoyment. To be able to kind of cast off psychological chains and feel like they can be themselves and walk around with a greater sense of competency and confidence and freedom. I think that's the greatest reward.

**Alie:** Do you watch any of your clients in sports games and you're like, "Yes. We did it!"

**Dr. Shepp:** [laughs] I do, but I say, "You did it" because they're really the ones who do all the hard work. We might collaborate in terms of what's going to lead them to a great outcome for themselves. But really, each client is the one that has to put things into practice and has to go through all of the hard work of changing their mindset, of unlearning things and learning new things instead, and it is a lot of hard work sometimes for people. So yes, it is a great reward to be able to see that.

**Alie:** That's why they get paid the big bucks! [Dr. Shepp laughs] Are you allowed to say who any of your clients past or present are?

**Dr. Shepp:** No, I don't.

**Alie:** Yeah, I didn't think so.

**Dr. Shepp:** Because I'm licensed and... Well, there's a few reasons. One is because I'm licensed and I would, you know, be sued. [laughing] Secondly, because I really value a person's privacy. It's something I've always valued ever since I was in training decades ago for this line of work. I really value a person's privacy as well as their right to self-determination. So if a person is going through change in their life, I feel like they should get do that without telling other people about it. Sometimes people will share that I work with them, but I never share that myself.

**Aside:** Dr. Shepphird is working on a book but before that is published, she recommends a few. She says *Bring Your "A" Game* by Jennifer Etnier is great. *Head's Up Baseball* by Tom Hanson is also great, so is Tom Verducci's *The Cubs Way*. These are some sports books she recommended. And the one I mentioned at the top about life-work balance, and rest and sports and energy and performance is called *The Power of Full Engagement*. That was a very good lesson in terms of working smarter not harder, as they say.

**Alie:** This has been amazing. Thank you so much.

**Dr. Shepp:** Thanks for the conversation. It's been really great talking with you.

**Alie:** Yay! I'm going to have to apply all of this to my real life now.

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You can find out more about Dr. Sari Shepphird at [DrShepp.com](http://DrShepp.com) and I have links up for all of my episodes at [AlieWard.com/Ologies](http://AlieWard.com/Ologies) so you can find all kinds of additional reading and pictures and things like that.

Thank you again to everyone who is making this show possible by supporting on [Patreon](https://www.patreon.com/). Right now, there's about 220 of you Patrons who are making it possible to make this show and pay the wonderful Steven Ray Morris for editing, cover the costs of equipment and all that. Thank you for that.

Thank you, Hannah Lipow and Erin Talbert for running the [Ologies Podcast Facebook group](#), which is a total party. Thank you, Shannon Feltus and Boni Dutch. They help me with my merch at [OlogiesMerch.com](http://OlogiesMerch.com). You can get shirts and hats and totes and pins. There's so much cool stuff up there and the sales definitely support the show. The theme song was written and performed by Nick Thorburn, aka Nick Diamond, of the band Islands. He also did *Serial's* theme. He's so good.

Okay, stay tuned. Some episodes I've already recorded that are coming up are: evolutionary biology; museology about museums; gelotology, which is the scientific study of laughter; herpetology, sneks, lizards, turtles; and I'll be recording a sexology episode for Valentine's Day. So good stuff.

And if you listen to the very end of the show, lately I've been giving you all a secret of the week, just as a thanks for sticking around. Okay, here's one. When I was younger I would see those orange moving trucks everywhere and I always thought they were Hawaiian, like uhowul, uhauhual, ohauhual, and one day it clicked that it was U-Haul. As in you. You drive the truck. You haul. I remember being shook. I was just so disappointed. The whole world seemed different. And I think about it every time I see one, which is like daily. Okay, ask smart people dumb questions.

Berbye.

*Transcribed by Erica Hinders*

### **Some links which may be of use perhaps:**

[Diaphragmammatical breathing](#)

[How to Breathe and Stuff](#)

[Solo athletes get the deproshons](#)

[Positive self-talk is ... positive](#)

[Weird sports superstitions](#)

[Just say "I'M EXCITED"](#)

[Riots Lakers](#)

[Nika riots](#)

[Which Williams sister is which](#)

[How does adrenaline block pain?](#)

[Identity foreclosure](#)

[The Power of Full Engagement](#)

[Books about saying HELL NO](#)

[Bring Your A Game by Jennifer Either](#)

[The Cubs Way by Tom Verducci](#)

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